

Shadows of Darkness

by Charlene Newcomb; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

The scene had become all too familiar in the city of Ariana. Six stormtroopers emerged from the transport. They moved efficiently up the old stone steps to the house. Blaster rifles were ready for any sign of trouble. TK-121 glanced at his comrades and nodded his head. He blasted the door and four of the troopers burst into the house.

Its occupants had been asleep, but were jolted awake by the sound of the door being destroyed. Carl Barzon appeared at his bedroom door.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded as TK-718 pushed past him into the bedroom.

"Let me go!" his son demanded, fighting against two troopers who dragged him from another room.

"No one else here, sir," TK-718 reported.

"All right. Put him on the transport," TK-121 ordered.

"Where are you taking my son?" Dr. Barzon asked. "He has done nothing wrong!"

The stormtroopers ignored Barzon's pleas as Cord Barzon was roughly escorted from the house. The younger man saw the pain in his father's eyes.

"Father, don't worry. It will be all right," he called back to him. Barzon watched in horror as they took his only family away. He'd never felt so helpless. Leaning against the door frame, he watched the transport pull away and realized how ironic it was that the Imperials had arrested his son. Cord, a student at the university where Barzon taught and conducted research, had never been involved in underground resistance activities here on Garos. And he didn't even suspect his father's role with that group. Dr. Barzon always anticipated stormtroopers would show up at his door one day -- but to arrest him, not his son.

Now, they'd just forced Cord to go. And there was nothing Carl Barzon could do about it.

* * *

Two wild boetays howled in the distance. A flock of crupas flew overhead, silhouetted against one of Garos' moons. The creatures of the night were headed east toward the valley as the winds turned cold in the mountains surrounding the mining center.

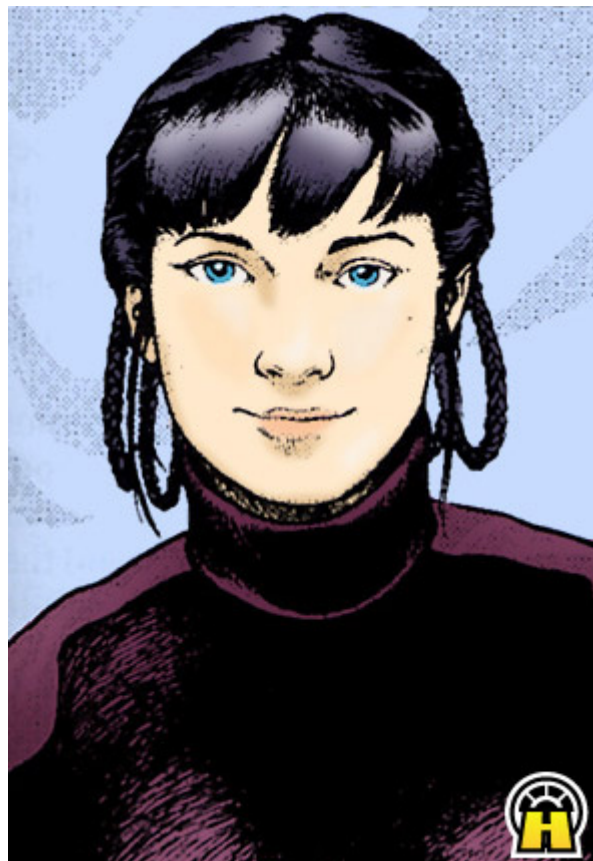
Chance watched the crupas disappear above the tree canopy, then turned his attention back to the Imperial mining complex. It was the first time he'd been this close in a while - increased Imperial patrols and sensors south of Ariana had prevented the underground from direct observation for the last several months.

"Well, LG," he said, using a nickname that stood for little girl, something he'd called his comrade since their first recon mission almost four years earlier, "I heard that you were the one who found us this hole in the sensor net."

"With the right equipment on an airspeeder, you can do all kinds of neat tricks," 20-year-old Alex Winger replied. Not to mention that Air Defense wasn't as likely to shoot down her father's airspeeder.

They'd grown used to Alex's crazy stunts, politely reminding her to leave the restricted flight zone. Being the daughter of Garos' Imperial governor did have its benefits.

"Yeah," he said with a big grin, "the right equipment and the right pilot!"



Alex trained her macrobinoculars on the mine entrance. "Looks like it's shift change time," she said. Fifty miners, all dressed in the same gray jumpsuits, emerged from the mines with a stormtrooper escort. Lights around the complex illuminated tired expressions on the miners' dirt-smeared faces. They trudged across the compound toward prison barracks.

"They've got it down to a routine now." Chance's smile turned to a scowl as he pulled his hood tighter around his head to ward off the cold. "What do you think," he asked as he scanned the rest of the complex, "ten or twelve hours 'til they finish that shuttle platform?"

Alex studied the structure rising on the southwestern side of the complex. "No longer than that," she agreed.

Chance couldn't take his eyes off that landing platform as he weighed possible options. "You know, LG, we could hit it with the Plex. Range is about 200 meters from here. Two or three shots ought to do some major damage," he told her.

"And bring down half the Imperial forces of Garos on us!" she reminded him. "Our escape options are pretty poor on this side of the complex, Chance. The only way out is to the east. And they'd close that gap so fast --"

"So, you don't think it's worth the risk?"

Alex shook her head. "That stockpiled ore doesn't seem to be going anywhere. There hasn't been a Star Destroyer here for a pickup in months. Wish we heard more news about what's going on out there," she said, cocking her head toward the stars. "It's been so quiet."

"Yeah." He took a drink from his thermajug, leaned back against a small boulder, and stared into the star-filled sky.

Alex noticed the look in Chance's eyes. He really didn't belong here. Like her, he had the stars in his blood. "I've always felt that my destiny is somewhere up there," she told him. "You're not from Garos either, are you, Chance?"

He turned, recognizing a variety of emotions in her voice, and wondering how she knew. He'd never told anyone about his past.

"Right," he said.

Alex sighed. "I was brought here when I was six. My family was killed during an Imperial raid," she said quietly as distant screams pierced her mind. She could barely remember the grandparents who were raising her then. She'd been left in their care by a father she remembered even less, a father who probably didn't realize she was still alive. But memories of the raid were vivid after all these years.

"I --" Chance paused, deciding against telling her what he knew about her past, or his own. He reached over and touched her hand gently. "I'm sorry," he finally said. He'd been there when they found the unconscious six-year-old buried in the rubble. He'd seen firsthand the destruction caused by the Empire he once served. It had changed her life -- and it had changed his.

She shook off her sad thoughts. "Do you believe in fate, Chance?"

"You mean, that because of what happened to your family, you ended up on Garos working for the underground? Well, yeah," he nodded his head, "I'd call that fate, LG."

She smiled at him. "So, when do I hear your story, my friend?"

"Someday," he replied. "Maybe."

* * *

Dim lighting gave the impression of eternal night in the underground resistance's operations center. But buried deep beneath Imperial Headquarters, the place was crewed around the clock by ops huddled over communications equipment and computers that lit their faces with a soft bluish glow. The passage of time was evident only by a chrono which hung above the door.

When Alex entered the room at 0800, she nodded to ops at the comm intercept stations and waved to another friend making notations on the master display across the room. Then she noticed Mika Kaebra urgently pointing her in the direction of Magir Paca's office.

She glanced toward the transparent wall that separated Paca's sparsely furnished office from the main operations room. A feeling of dread swept over her. For a brief moment, a vision of a snowy mountainside, a vision she'd had many times, filled her senses.

Carl Barzon sat with his head buried in his hands. Magir Paca, one of the leaders of the resistance, was bent over him, his hand offering a comforting touch on the doctor's shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Alex asked as she entered the room.

Barzon looked up at Alex, his eyes filled with grief. She'd never seen him like this. "They took my son, Alex! They took Cord!" he exclaimed.

"Who?" she asked, though she already knew the answer.

"Imperial stormtroopers! They came to the house during the night and took him away!"

Alex looked at Paca. "Is he being held at Headquarters?" she asked him, hoping they might be able to free Cord before he was taken to the mines.

"He's gone, Alex," Barzon answered.

"Gone?"

"They've already moved him to the mining center," Paca told her. "He wasn't brought to Imperial Headquarters for interrogation like the others."

Did that mean the Imperials knew Cord Barzon was not a member of the underground? What were they up to? An alarm went off in Alex's mind. The Empire had been extremely interested in Doctor Barzon's research on the ore from the Garosian mines and its possible use in cloaking technology. They'd tried numerous times to persuade him to work harder. Since bribery hadn't seemed to work, would they use his son as a pawn?

Alex sat down across from Barzon and took his hands into hers. "We'll find out what's going on, Doctor."

He nodded his head, wondering what good that knowledge would do them. They couldn't go after Cord. The mining center was too well defended. And Carl Barzon knew it better than anyone.

"Will you be okay?" she asked him.

"I have no choice, Alex." He took a deep breath and stood up to leave. "I must go to the University now. I have a class to teach." As they watched him depart, a chill crawled up Alex's spine -- that snowy mountainside flickered in her mind again. *Why?* she wondered.

"He'll be all right," Paca said, though the tone of his voice indicated he wasn't wholly convinced.

"Do you think this was a random pickup, Paca?" Alex asked.

Paca rubbed a hand over weary eyes. "No. It's got to be a setup," he said, echoing her thoughts. "I'll talk to Carl again later and see how he feels about disappearing for a while."

"You'll never convince him to go into hiding, Paca," Alex told him. "He knows what the Empire will do to Cord."

Paca knew too. "Damn," he said quietly. Then he remembered that Alex had come to report on Imperial activities around the mines. "So, Alex, could the daughter of Garos' Imperial Governor possibly have any good news for us this morning?"

"I wish I did," she groaned. "Our Imperial *friends* are extremely busy. They're working right through the night. We counted 50 miners per four-hour shift. And they moved two more of those containers of ore to the holding area. It's under heavy guard."





mountain of her visions --

"Alex, take my hand!"

Through the swirling snow, a hand reached out to her. She struggled to touch fingertips just beyond her grasp. Her hand scraped against bare rock, then over the icy slope. Fingertip met fingertip, only to be torn apart by a sweeping rush of wind -- and Alex fell into a dark abyss --

"No!" she cried out.

"Alex, what is it? Are you okay?" Paca asked, reaching over to touch her arm. He'd never seen such a frightened look in her eyes. She shook her head to clear the vision, then glanced quickly from Paca to her chrono trying to hide the flood of emotions that overcame her.

That vision -- she'd had that vision a dozen times over the last two years. *That's not how it happens*, a voice in the back of her mind screamed. The hands! They'd always met before! The man from her vision had always pulled her to safety. *I don't understand!*

"I -- I'd better get going or I'll be late for class," she finally managed to say.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she told him, but that spark that had always given him hope was gone.

"Okay." He didn't know what else to say.

* * *

Imperial Governor Tork Winger entered the foyer of the mansion and stared blankly around the room. He felt tired, more tired than he'd felt in years. Maybe it was his age. Perhaps he was getting too old to deal with politics and its intrigues.

Winger sighed, glancing at the ancient timepiece in the foyer ... 2200. He'd missed dinner with Alexandra this evening. Since she'd moved to the university several months earlier, they'd made special dinner dates once a week. And now he wouldn't be able to see her. He frowned. That would have been the one bright spot of this entire day.

He heard a movement at the top of the stairs. He looked up, his tired eyes catching sight of his lovely young daughter. "Alexandra!" he exclaimed. "I didn't expect to find you here. I thought you would have gone back into town." He suddenly realized she wasn't smiling. No, more than that -- there was an uncharacteristic glint of anger in her eyes.

Alex rushed down the stairs. "Father, what is going on?"

"Hmm. Our intercept ops haven't heard a thing about a pickup yet, but it looks like they're expecting one soon."

"Well, they'll be able to move the ore right from the mines up to ships in orbit. The shuttle landing platform will be operational within four to five hours."

Paca cursed silently to himself. He'd worked with the underground for years, yet he'd never felt so powerless.

They'd lost an entire underground cell two weeks earlier -- five operatives -- when the Empire began this rounding up action. Not to mention increased security, the shuttle platform, stockpiled ore, and now Carl's son abducted. And there was nothing he could do about any of it. He shook his head in disgust.

Alex sensed his despondency. But perhaps even more than Paca realized, she knew that Cord Barzon's arrest could touch lives far beyond Garos IV. She shuddered to think what might happen if Carl Barzon was forced to complete his research. Could nothing be done to stop the Empire?

The door into Paca's office slid open, and Alex felt a cold blast of air as the room seemed to fade around her. Suddenly, she found herself dangling from a rope, clinging to the snow-covered

"What's wrong, Alexandra?"

"A friend of mine was arrested by stormtroopers last night! They dragged him from his home in the middle of the night!"

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Cord Barzon."

"Dr. Barzon's son?" Winger was as surprised as Alex was angry. "Perhaps Cord was working for the underground."

"Cord? Father, I've known him for years. That is ridiculous!"

"I'm sure there is a rational explanation for this, Alexandra. Tomorrow we will --"

"Father, you know the Imperials are just snatching people from their homes. They aren't looking for the underground! They don't care who they take!"

"Alexandra, please --"

She ran from the room to the patio overlooking the Tahika Cliffs. So many times Alex found comfort gazing at the surf pounding the cliffs. But not tonight. She trembled with anger. She clenched a fist, closing her eyes. An overwhelming feeling of helplessness threatened to overtake her.

Hadn't it only been a few months before she'd been confident that the New Republic would push toward Garos? But then there had been rumors of a Grand Admiral and a renewed offensive by the Empire. Help seemed farther away than ever. Could this Grand Admiral succeed where the Emperor and Lord Vader had failed?

Suddenly, a voice spoke to her through the darkness. It sounded so familiar, yet she'd never heard these words before --

Remember, Alex. Fear and anger are the dark side of the Force. Calm. You must be calm --

"Alexandra?" another voice called to her.

Alex opened her eyes. Her father had come up beside her. "I'm sorry about Cord, Alexandra," he said, taking her hand gently. She looked into his eyes. "I know, Father. It's not your fault. I didn't mean to yell at you."

He squeezed her hand. "These are hard times, Alexandra."

"But does that justify the use of force against innocent people?" she asked him, wishing she could tell him what she really thought about his Empire.

He took a deep breath and sighed. "No," he admitted. "Let me see what I can find out about young Barzon."

"Thank you, Father," she said as she wrapped her arms around him and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Listen, my dear, can I count on your help at a reception the day after tomorrow for the senior officers of the Star Destroyer *Tempest*?"

"*Tempest* is returning to Garos? It's been months since we've had any visitors."

"Yes, I hope it's a sign that the Grand Admiral's offensive is a success. Perhaps we shall have a victory celebration!"

"Yes," she forced a smile, and laid her head against his shoulder. "I can't wait to hear their news."

"It's a bit chilly out tonight," Winger observed.

"You'd better get inside, Father. You know this cold air isn't good for you," she reminded him.



"All right, my dear."

"I'll come inside soon," she told him.

"Here," he said, placing his jacket around her shoulders. "Just a few minutes now."

"Okay," she said as he left her alone on the patio.

One of Garos' moons peeked through the trees. It cast a gleam of light across the shadows that darkened the grounds around the mansion. Alex watched the light dance and felt her spirits lift. *Wherever there is light, there is hope*, she told herself.

Yes, there was still hope -- there always would be hope, even during the darkest hours they were yet to face.

Alex turned her gaze up into the skies. And instead of feeling frightened, she found strength. The Force would be with them.

The peacefulness of the Garosian late night was broken by the screeching of heavy machinery. Cranes on top of the shuttle platform hoisted ore containers from the forest floor.

Security was even tighter than on their previous recon mission near the mines. Chance and Alex had been forced to relocate twice during the last hour because of increased scout troopers roaming the hillsides around the mining center. Stormtroopers patrolled the complex. Others stood guard near the containers that were being moved.

"Shh!"

"Not again," he murmured, looking around for sign of troopers.

"Listen," Alex said.

Chance's brow crinkled in concentration. The symphonic rustling of tree branches and crooning of crupas were drowned out by noises emanating from the complex. He couldn't hear anything else. Then he noticed that Alex had her macrobinoculars trained upward, scanning the skies.

Suddenly, through a break in the trees and coming over the mountains that skirted the nearby cliffs, he spotted the shuttle. He couldn't believe she'd heard it. Even as the craft drew closer, the sound of its engines was barely audible as it came in to land on the platform.

"Cargo vessel," he observed. "I'm not sure of the type." Alex nodded. Here to pick up some ore for transport to the *Tempest*. Looked as if the underground would have no chance to stop this shipment.

Chance let his macros drop around his neck and noticed the frown on Alex's face. "You're not thinking what I think you're thinking," he said, wondering if she was reconsidering using the Plex against that shuttle platform.

"No," she said wistfully. Suddenly, she jerked her head to scan the hillsides behind them. She turned quickly back to Chance and held a finger up to her lips. He still heard nothing, but caught a movement through the trees about 20 meters from their position.

"C'mon, this way," he whispered.

Two scout troopers were patrolling on foot. They hadn't spotted their quarry, but it was evident that sensors had tipped them off to a presence nearby. Fortunately for Chance and Alex, the troopers had been unable to pinpoint them because sensors didn't work well around the mines.

Alex crawled behind Chance through the thick underbrush and



realized there were more than two troopers. Obviously, they'd called for reinforcements. At least a half dozen more were trying to encircle them.

"They're all over the place," Chance whispered back to her.

"We'd better split up," she told him.

"Okay, head for the speeder," he said. "And don't wait for me." Alex turned north, hoping the troopers wouldn't expect her to head toward the perimeter fence that skirted the mining center. With a little luck she could slip right through their trap. She took one look back and saw Chance disappear over a ridge heading east. Two scout troopers did pass about 10 meters to either side of her. Noise from the mining center masked her footsteps over fallen branches. She moved quickly through the hills, then headed east to find the speeder she and Chance had hidden in one of Garos' many caves.

Two kilometers later, with no sign of pursuit, she felt safe. Then blaster fire erupted off to her right. Alex moved toward it. Through the trees she spotted Chance, on his knees and cradling his right arm. Moonlight reflected off white armor. One lone scout trooper stood there, with a blaster pointed at Chance's head. His comrades wouldn't be far behind. Alex knew there wasn't much time.

Oh, how she wished to hear those screeching cranes near the mining center now! They were just a distant hum, not nearly loud enough to allow a stealthy approach. She only had one choice.

Okay, Alex. One shot, and it's got to be a good one. She took a deep breath and brought her blaster rifle up to bear on the scout trooper.



She aimed and fired. The blast lit the hillside for a split second before the trooper fell.

"You okay?" Alex asked as she ran up to Chance.

"I'll make it, LG. Thanks," he smiled at her. "C'mon, his bike's over there -- agh!" He made the mistake of pointing with his wounded arm and grimaced aloud.

"Better hurry!" she said, helping him to his feet. She could already hear the distant whine of other speeder bikes. "We're gonna have company."

They climbed on the bike. Chance sat behind Alex, grasping her waist with his good arm. Alex revved up the engine, punched a button to jam the other troopers' communications, and hit the accelerator.

* * *

Desto Mayda sat in Paca's office. He was not a happy man. "I still can't believe we can come up with no reasonable plan to destroy that shuttle platform," he repeated for the third time.

"Desto, old friend, look what happened to one of our best operatives last night!" His voice was filled with exasperation. "If you can find a way to take out that platform without getting anyone unnecessarily killed, I'm willing to listen," Paca told him as Alex entered the office.

"Hello, Alex," Paca greeted her, noticing that the grim expression on her face matched his own mood this morning. "You've got something?"

"I was just upstairs with Dair in General Zakar's office," she said, referring to one of their people who worked undercover in the Imperial Army. "Have our ops picked up any news of Coruscant?"

"No. Why? What have you heard?"

"The Empire has blockaded Coruscant!"

"We'll never see help from the New Republic now!" Mayda bellowed.

"Where's this information coming from?" Paca asked calmly.

"Zakar's aide Nilo heard it from someone in Imperial communications," she told them, knowing that a large percentage of the information they'd come across from that particular source was reliable. "And there's a Star Destroyer on the way to Garos," she added, repeating the news her father told her. "It looks like they plan to move that ore."

"What next?" Mayda exclaimed.

It seemed like they'd heard nothing but bad news since this Grand Admiral had surfaced. Even on Garos, the underground had been unable to make any inroads in recent days. When would it all end?

Mayda impatiently tapped the monitor on Paca's desk which showed a display of the mining center. "Alex, speaking of the ore " he said. "We've been discussing that shuttle platform."

Alex's eyebrows raised in question. Paca rubbed his hand across his forehead, unable to believe that Mayda was pursuing this topic again. Alex saw the look on his face and hid a grin.

"You're one of the few people who've seen the complex up close," Mayda was saying. "Is there no way we can destroy it?"

"Desto, we've been over this a hundred times," Paca reminded him. "To the west and south, we're cut off by the Tahika Cliffs. And security has been quadrupled in the last few months --"

"What about using the Plex?" he looked at Alex, ignoring Paca.

"We'd practically have to be in the complex to get a good shot at it," Alex said.

"Too risky," Paca interrupted. "At that close range, what would be your chance of getting away before Imperial troops came down on top of you?"

Alex looked Mayda straight in the eye. She remembered what she and Chance had gone through just a few hours earlier. "Impossible."

He pounded his fist on the desk, filled with frustration. "What about a supply run?" he asked, though that idea had already been rejected in other discussions.

Paca was shaking his head, no again. But suddenly, Alex's eyes lit up. "Wait a minute," she said, suddenly remembering another conversation she'd overheard in the general's office. "Inspection tour." Alex's eyes darted around the room as a plan began to formulate in her mind. "My father and the general are going on an inspection tour tomorrow," she told them.

"No, Alex," Paca said firmly. "If you went along, and if you managed to plant some charges, you'd be a prime suspect --"

"Let's hear her plan, Paca," Mayda said.

"This will work," she said, nodding her head. "Let me explain..."

A little while later --

"... And we'll have a team waylay the pilot after we return from the inspection. The platform explodes, the pilot turns up missing -- they'll have to suspect he's responsible for the sabotage."

Mayda nodded excitedly. "The explosion will have to be timed to go off before there's a change of guards. When that platform blows, there won't be anyone around to dispute your story," he observed. "No one would dare question the daughter of our Imperial Governor."

Paca nodded slowly, "It just might work," he said.

"It will," Mayda said confidently.

Paca looked from Mayda to Alex. There were a lot of details to work out. "Okay. Let's go over this one more time..."

* * *

The *Lambda*-class shuttle swept in from the west, approaching the mining center complex over the Locura Ocean. The pilot turned southward and skirted the Tahika Cliffs after receiving clearance from Air Defense Command.

Shortly after they'd departed the spaceport, Alex made herself at home in the cockpit, casually throwing her cape over the back of her seat. She engaged the pilot in conversation, enchanting him with her knowledge of the shuttle. She tried to talk him into letting her fly --

after all, she did have nine years of experience and was considered one of the best pilots on Garos IV. But with General Zakar on board, the young lieutenant wasn't about to let any civilian, even the daughter of the Imperial Governor, fly his ship.

The shuttle flew inland over the Cliffs. For several seconds the only view was of treetops, then the landing platform came into view, carefully nestled between trees and mountains. The pilot eased his way through the towering trees and gently set the ship down, landing near a cargo vessel.

Major General Carner, the commanding officer of the mining center, approached the shuttle with four stormtroopers at his heels. They snapped to attention as the shuttle's hatch hissed open.

"Governor Winger, General Zakar, Miss Winger. Welcome to the mining center. We are ready for inspection," he said crisply.

"Thank you, General," Winger replied. "I see you're already busy transporting the ore," he said, pointing to the cargo shuttle.

"Yes, we're finally able to get our work done without interference from the underground," Carner told them.

"Excellent," General Zakar agreed.

"If you will please follow me."

The turbolift whisked them down to ground level in less than a minute. *Not much time*, Alex thought. Another stormtrooper popped to attention when the door slid open, then followed the group at a discreet distance down a path toward the main part of the complex. Major General Carner delighted in showing off his crack troops, his well-defended garrison, and of course, his shuttle platform.

Alex shivered as a cold breeze swept through the complex. She reached over and touched her father's arm. "I left my cape on the shuttle, Father. You continue with the tour, and I'll catch up with you in a few minutes."

"Of course, my dear."

"I'll start our inspection at the bunker, Miss Winger," Carner said, pointing to a building that was carved into the mountain on the far side of the complex.

"I'll meet you there," she said, returning to the turbolift. As the lift sped back up some 40 meters, Alex studied the access control panel.

Boy, she thought, this is going to be interesting.

The door slid open. Stormtroopers remained on guard. Alex ignored them and headed straight for the shuttle. The pilot nodded to her and smiled when he saw her grab the cape. "Cold out there?"

"Very cold," she told him as she threw the cape around her shoulders and walked back down the ramp.

All right, she thought. Here goes nothing.

The turbolift door had barely closed behind her when Alex reached for the medallion she wore. The sharp, pointed edges of the sunburst design made an excellent tool for prying things open. Wouldn't her father be surprised that she'd found such an ingenious use for his gift?

In less than four seconds, the access panel was open. Alex pulled some specially-rigged charges from her cape's inside pocket. She pressed the detonite compound into the recess around exposed control circuits, then pushed the timer into the opening. In the darkened niche, her fingers fumbled across tiny buttons. And too late, she realized that the timer was counting down, set to go



off in four minutes!

Alex beat her fist against the wall. "Relax," she told herself. "It will all workout." She replaced the control panel a half second before the turbolift door opened back on the ground level.

But she wasn't prepared to see the stormtrooper blocking her way out of the lift. She gasped, and took a step backwards. But he, too, seemed to be caught off guard, then stepped aside to let her pass. That's when she came face to face with Cord Barzon.

No! This can't be happening!

Cord's eyes met hers. He smiled, almost embarrassed by his predicament. He shrugged his shoulders, lifting his hands to display the binders. Alex was struck by his calmness, his casual acceptance of the situation. She could sense that Cord understood the politics behind his imprisonment. And there was no fear in his heart, no anger toward his father.

"Cord, I --"

"Sorry, Miss. No talking with the prisoner," the stormtrooper told her.

Alex walked past Cord, holding his gaze.

Was there anything she could do to stop them? It wasn't just a matter of compromising herself -- she'd be condemning dozens of others in the underground. Her knowledge alone, in the hands of the Empire, could wipe out the resistance movement in Ariana.

Could she hold them here a few minutes -- three very long minutes? "Sergeant, where are you taking this man?"

"You'll have to take that up with General Zakar."

"But --"

Another stormtrooper prodded Cord into the lift. Alex started to say something else, but the door slid shut, rendering its own judgment. She stared at the door, unable to look away, knowing that for whatever ill-timed stroke of fate, Cord Barzon was about to die.

Alex turned slowly, and forced herself to move away from the shuttle platform. Her mind was filled with turmoil. Though she'd risked her own life time and again, she'd never been faced with a situation like this. To sacrifice one life so others could continue the fight -- it was a decision she hoped she would never have to make again.

Major General Carner had just finished explaining the bunker's defensive system as Alex joined the inspection tour. "Ah, just in time, Miss Winger," he said. "Shall we go in?"

Alex smiled and nodded. She took one last look at the shuttle platform. She hoped that Carl Barzon would understand.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked the complex. Alex grabbed her father and instinctively fell to the ground, pulling him down with her.

Within seconds, a dozen more explosions erupted outside the perimeter fence. Alex looked up cautiously and watched as the support leg of the landing platform groaned. In what seemed like slow motion, twisting, screeching metal finally gave way as the platform crashed to the ground.

* * *

General Zakar read the preliminary report on his datapad, then shook his head in disgust. He had stormed into Imperial Headquarters over an hour earlier, after that disaster at the mining center. He had underestimated the Garosian underground for the last time. As soon as this business with Dr. Barzon was concluded he would deal with them.

He clicked on the intercom. "Haslip, would you come into my office?"

Right away sir," the voice on the other end replied.

"You wanted to see me, General?" Dair Haslip said as he entered Zakar's office.

"I've prepared this report for Captain Emba on the *Tempest*," Zakar said as he pulled a card from the datapad. "Please take it down to communications and have them encrypt and transmit immediately, Lieutenant."

"Yes, General," he replied.

The intercom buzzed. "Yes?" Zakar said.

"Dr. Barzon is here, General," Lt. Polg called from the outer office.

"Bring him in," Zakar said, catching a glimpse of the frown on Haslip's face, but dismissing it as a sign of curiosity.

Dair recovered quickly, his straight-laced expression gave no hint that he and Carl Barzon were comrades in the underground. "Will there be anything else, General?" Dair asked.

"No, that will be all for now, Haslip."

Carl Barzon's hands were manacled, his face was pale and drawn. As Dair walked past him, they exchanged a brief glance, an imperceptible nod of the head. The door slid shut.

"Dr. Barzon. Please, come in. Sit down," he said.

Barzon didn't say a word. He eyed his adversary, taking a seat across from the general.

Zakar ignored the glare. "I'm sorry to bring you here in this manner," he apologized. "Guard, remove Dr. Barzon's binders."

"What is it that you want, General?" Barzon finally asked as he massaged his sore wrists.

"I understand your son was arrested earlier this week," Zakar said, noting the momentary flicker of pain in the other man's eyes. He paused, waiting to see a further response, but Barzon offered none. "Doctor, if you want my help in securing Cord's release, then you must cooperate with me."

"Cooperate?" Barzon questioned. "My son has done nothing wrong!"

Good, thought Zakar, *a reaction* -- there was anger in Barzon's voice. "No, of course not," he agreed.

"Why have you taken Cord, General?"

Zakar chose not to answer that question. No, he couldn't let Barzon know that Cord was already dead. They'd have nothing to hold over him. He leaned forward in his chair. "You see, Doctor, your recent inactivity has not gone unnoticed. The Grand Admiral is --" he paused for more effect, "displeased that you've not made progress on your research with the ore."

Barzon turned defensive. "I have spent years working on this project! Research takes time, General."

Zakar studied the other man's face. "The Grand Admiral feels you may need more incentive to complete your research," Zakar told him.

Barzon sighed, nodding his head in understanding. "So you have kidnapped my son and will hold him hostage until I give you what you want."

"Kidnap is such a harsh word, Doctor."

"General, if I had the answers, I would gladly give them to your Grand Admiral to secure my son's release. But I do not. Breakthroughs do not come overnight. It may be years before the ore is refined to a point that the Empire might find it useful in the construction of cloaked weapons."

"Nevertheless, Doctor, perhaps this will give you a reason to work harder." Zakar noticed that Barzon's anger was subsiding, the emotion that replaced it was not hard to decipher. Barzon stared out the window, a blank expression on his face. Breaking a man's spirit was not something Zakar relished, but orders had to be followed. Was it not for the glory of the Empire?

He clicked on the intercom. "Polg, contact the spaceport. Inform Commander Skilis on the shuttle *Kandarra* that Dr. Barzon is on his way."

"Yes, sir," Polg acknowledged from the other room.

"Where are you taking me, General?" Barzon asked softly.

"To our research facility."

"But, I have classes to teach --"

"We shall inform your colleagues at the University."

So, this is it, Barzon thought. They would force him to work. Not that he hadn't expected this. But what choice did he have? At least they didn't suspect his involvement with the underground. "And my son?"

"Cord has been conscripted into the service of the Empire, Doctor," Zakar said. "When you have completed your research, Cord will be *allowed* to leave if he chooses to do so."

"I see," he said slowly, doubting that Cord would ever be allowed to leave. "I need my notes --"

"Everything you require will be delivered to you at the research facility." Zakar stood up, indicating their discussion had ended. Barzon rose slowly from the chair.

"Guard," Zakar said, still watching Barzon very closely. "Please escort Dr. Barzon to the spaceport." As they turned to leave, Zakar called to him.

"Good luck with your research, Doctor."

* * *

It was risky for Dair Haslip to enter the underground tunnel system through the secret entrance in Imperial Headquarters, especially during the middle of the day. But Dair was determined to let his friends know what had happened to Carl Barzon.

When he entered the main ops center, Dair found Paca embracing a tearful Alex. "Don't worry, Alex," he was saying, "We'll get Carl down here right away."

"What's going on?" Dair asked.

Alex looked at Dair, her eyes filled with grief. "Cord Barzon died at the mining center. It's all my fault!"

"What are you talking about?"

"It's not your fault, Alex," Paca said reassuringly. "The timer wouldn't set for the three hour delay," he explained to Dair.

"You mean you were there when the thing went up! Are you all right?" Dair asked.

"I saw them take Cord to the landing platform. I should have stopped them!"

"Then you'd be under arrest, Alex. Or maybe dead." Paca said, silently thanking the Force that diversionary explosions outside the perimeter had added to the confusion at the mining center. "Stop blaming yourself. You couldn't have saved Cord!"

"Oh, no," Dair said quietly. "Dr. Barzon."

Alex felt Dair's sense change. Before he uttered another word, she knew what he was going to say.

"What about him?" Paca asked, suddenly realizing that Dair rarely came into the ops center at this time of day.

"They've arrested Carl Barzon."

Paca stood silently for a moment. He had talked to Carl only the evening before about this possibility. Barzon had chosen not to go into hiding, fearing for his son's life. And now his son was dead. And he didn't even know it.

"Have they moved him into the detention block?"

Dair looked at both of them. "No, he's on his way to the spaceport."

"They're taking him off-planet?"

"We've got to stop them!" Alex said.

Paca knew they had to try. "All right, you'd better get back to your desk, Dair." He called over to Mika Kaebra at the comm station. "Alert a team at the spaceport. If Carl's not under heavy guard we might have a chance to free him."

The tension was obvious. Everyone in the ops center watched Paca pace the room. He never paced the room.

Thoughts focused on Carl Barzon. He had been a valuable member of the underground for over 14 years. Could they save him from this unnecessary sacrifice? A sacrifice the father had been willing to make to keep his son alive --he son who died never truly knowing his father.

Alex sat down next to Mika, still feeling responsible for what was happening. If only she'd arrived at the ops center sooner! They could have warned Carl to disappear before he was arrested.

She hung her head, covering her face with her hands and trying to block the pain. She shook her head in disgust -- she knew as well as anyone that there just wasn't enough time to organize a rescue attempt.

No, no time, she thought as she lifted her head to check the chrono. And suddenly, she wasn't in the ops center anymore --

She stared at the body crumpled on the floor, looked at the blaster in her hand, then turned to her companion.

"He may have called security," he told her. "We'd better get out of here."

He'd barely spoken the words when Alex sensed it was already too late to go out the way they'd come in. He felt it, too, even before they heard the footsteps at the far end of the corridor.

"This way," she said, grabbing his hand and leading him through a darkened lab. Across the room, she'd noticed another exit.

Within seconds they were outside, looking over the waist-high balcony wall, down the side of the mountain. The wind howled, whipping snow around their bodies. Neither one said a word as they pulled grappling hooks from their utility belts. They worked swiftly, knowing the stormtroopers weren't far behind.

One quick toss and the hooks were wedged tightly between crags in the rocky slope above them. Alex climbed atop the stone ledge, jumped backwards, and rappelled down the side of the mountain. Through the swirling snow she saw her companion do the same a few meters above her.

Then suddenly, she slid uncontrollably down the mountainside! Seconds later the rope went taut, caught by some unseen force. "Alex!" he screamed above the shrieking wind. "Take my hand!"

She sensed a powerful force, a feeling of great calm engulfed her. His hand reached out across the icy slope to meet hers. Fingertips touched --

"Paca, I found the channel," Mika was saying, as Alex realized she was in the ops center. The tragedy continued to unfold.

Deadly quiet pervaded the room. Alex felt Paca's strong hands on her shoulders as he watched Mika's display at the intercept station. As he transcribed the transmissions between the shuttle and the spaceport, Mika opened up the comm channel so everyone in the ops center could hear the ship that took their comrade away.

"Shuttle *Kandarra*, you are cleared to depart, the voice on the comlink said.

"Thank you, spaceport control," the *Kandarra's* pilot called back.

Goodbye, old friend, Paca thought.

Alex stared at the display. That snowy mountainside pervaded her senses again. And then it all became clear in her mind. That's where they were taking Carl Barzon! That had to be the location of the secret Imperial research base!

Somehow, somewhere, she would find that mountain. She would find Carl Barzon. That mountain was part of her destiny. She could feel it!

Two figures on a snowy mountainside -- two hands reaching across a vast whiteness -- fingertips stretching, meeting -- a powerful force drawing one hand into the other -- hand in hand -- the mountain would be conquered -- and light would prevail --

The Force will be with you ... always.